

The University of Chicago

THE GROUNDS OF DIVISIONS AMONG
THE DISCIPLES OF CHRIST

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

1939

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ALFRED THOMAS DeGROOT

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The Disciples of Christ in North America numbered 1,630,393 members in 1938. The centennial of their existence was celebrated in 1909, in recognition of the representative character of Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address, written and published in 1809, the magna charta of their movement.

The Restoration movement was a program to secure unity in the church universal by means of restoring the essential features of the primitive, apostolic church. The simplicity of this plan commended it to hosts of Christians who were conscious of the great sin of the church, which was its ineffectiveness because of its fragmentation into hostile or at least competitive denominations. "Our Plea," as this program for restoring the ancient order was affectionately termed, soon established its own distinctive churches within the total Christian community.

In an age when the principle of evolution was unheard of, and the Bible throughout was esteemed to be of a consistent and unvarying level of inspiration, it was easy to assume that "the church" of the New Testament was equally consistent and unvarying in its unfolding from the minds of the early evangelists. The orthodox teaching of the Restoration leaders was that the New

Testament contained perfectly discernable blue prints and specifications of a one-and-only church. This remains as the assumption of the present day Churches of Christ, and of the conservative Disciples. An article in the Gospel Advocate for 1933 said:

God gave Moses a blue print of the tabernacle..... If God were particular that the tabernacle in the wilderness be made exactly according to specifications, surely he would be more so concerning the true tabernacle "which the Lord pitched, and not man." The Lord gave to the Apostles, therefore, a model of the church.

Chapter I, "Formative Years (Unity Proposed: the Era of Isms, 1800-1860)" relates in detail that the formative years of the Restoration movement constituted an era of almost countless experiments in religion. The significant fact to be noted in this welter of "isms" is that, almost alone among them, the Disciples came to noteworthy power. They proclaimed not only a protest (against church divisions); they announced also a plan (the restoration of the primitive church). The main body of the movement, the present day Disciples of Christ, gradually modified the concept of restoration, in its practical aspects, to permit adjustment to changing needs.

The measure of success which came to the Disciples in the first century of their existence is a matter of widely known historical record. Today, however, the church union enterprise of the Nineteenth Century Reformation is itself divided. The more or less unified movement of the first and second generations now has fallen into two groups of churches which are listed separately in the United States Census of Religious Bodies, while real and apparently irremediable sub-schisms have taken place in one of these two major branches of the parent stock. A third segment of the

movement, including over 100,000 members, united with the Congregationalists in 1930. This spectacle of divided unionists is the most obvious indication that somewhere in the program of the movement is to be found a cause for schism. Certainly a century and a quarter of experiment with the proposals of the founders is sufficient time to demonstrate their constitutional strength and weakness, genius and folly, truth and error.

It is the purpose of the present work to trace the genesis and exodus of the schisms which have come to pass in the Restoration movement. In the process of this uncovering we shall endeavor to ascertain the generating cause of these schisms. Having made our investigations in advance of this writing, we are ready to set forth our thesis, namely: that the principle of restoring a fixed pattern of a primitive Christian church is divisive and not unitive.

One emphasis in Chapter I is that Disciple historians have been slow to credit the prevalence of Bible Christianity churches and groups of churches in America, and the widespread sentiment on the frontier in favor of this simple form of church life and organization, as significant contributory factors in the rise and successful growth of the total Disciple movement. Shortly after the Campbells separated from the Baptists, in 1830, and became out-and-out Restorationists, or New Testament Christians, they became the dominant leaders of these scattered congregations, and provided the leadership, the education, the promotional ability (e.g., through their magazines, debates, etc.) and the cultural standing to which their lesser co-laborers could point with pride--which, all together, were to mean so much for the securing

of status as a Church. Because of this the names of earlier leaders in the same movement generally have been overlooked.

Restoration ideals--seen especially in the use of Bible names, opposition to human creeds, and church independency, especially of organized missions and even of Baptists Associations--had a lengthy pre-Campbell history on the frontier. This was peculiarly true in Kentucky, the first frontier state to be widely settled. Because the emergence of Restoration ideals in widespread fashion among early Kentucky Baptists has never been noticed in previous writings,¹ some space is allowed for a short development of this subject. A shorter treatment is given to Indiana independency as a source of the Disciple movement, which has at least been recognized before. Both of these states were settled principally by North Carolina emigrants, however, so a brief notice is given to Bible Christianity there. Extensive use is made of J. H. Spencer's History of Kentucky Baptists (Cincinnati: J. R. Baumes, 1885; 2 vols.) in this account. The list of Disciple elements treated includes:

The forerunners: frontier Baptists and other Independents
O'Kelly and the Republican Methodists
Scotch Baptists
New England Baptists
Barton W. Stone
The Campbells
Later Independents

Chapter II, "The Power of a Slogan (Unity Becomes a Fact;

¹ A. W. Fortune's The Disciples in Kentucky (Published by the Convention of the Christian Churches in Kentucky, 1932) fails to see this fact. He says, "Among the Baptist churches, the reform movement.....began in Pennsylvania.....in 1809" (p. 65). Yet there were numerous instances of pre-Campbell reform movements among the Baptists in the very state of which he wrote.

the Disciples and the Civil War)" relates the story of how the Disciples became the only religious body of size and wide dispersion in the United States which did not divide over Civil War issues. Since this subject never had been treated in detail before, and was of interest in itself apart from this thesis, the chapter was published separately in pamphlet form, entitled The Power of a Slogan (Advance, Ind.: Hustler Print, 1935).

Chapter III, "Integration and Disintegration (Unity Becomes a Problem: Events to the Census of 1906)" comes directly to the subject proper, and sets forth the grounds of divisions in the Restoration movement under heads of--

Instrumental Music
Societies
The Pastor System
Lesser Issues

Lying back of these easily detected issues, however, was a primary and generating factor which waited to trip the feet of this triumphantly marching American religious host. It was the tendency resident in every religion of a Book, to interpret that religion in a very literal manner, involving an exact reproduction of the forms and methods of the ancient faith. Over against this was the desire to make central in its purpose the great ideals of the religion, and to judge its formal expressions as secondary to the inner convictions.

It is the tendency of likeminded elements within groups to gravitate toward centers of doctrine and organization which provide a congenial association. As years went by and the Restoration movement enlarged its fellowship with many tens of thousands of Christians of varied experiences and opinions, the preservation

of unity became increasingly a problem. All that was needed to precipitate the dividing process was a cause or causes which would overcome the unitive ideals. The items enumerated above set this process in motion.

The actual separation of the Disciples of Christ and the Churches of Christ may be dated in 1906, the year of the United States Census of Religious Bodies. The correspondence leading to the separate listing of the two bodies in the census never has been assembled before, but is given here in detail.

The appearance of the Preachers List of the Churches of Christ in 1906 called for some recognition of the schism in the Restoration movement. The American Christian Missionary Society had been using one issue of its magazine, The American Home Missionary, each year to include a "Year Book" of the Churches of Christ (Disciples). The Gospel Advocate and the Christian Leader, for example, were included in the list of "Periodicals Published by the Disciples of Christ" up to and including 1905, but were dropped in 1906. The 1907 Year Book made a new, classified listing of the journals, marking these two papers with an "o", which was explained in the legend as meaning "Opposed to Missionary Societies." After that year the listing of periodicals was discontinued, perhaps as a solution of the problem of what journals should be called "ours." The first mention of a division existing in the ranks of the Disciples was made in the 1910 Year Book.

W. R. Warren, Statistical Secretary, wrote:

For several years past each annual publication of our statistics has called forth an outcry of surprise and disappointment. This year this will naturally be louder and more general than ever. In the face of the tremendous success of our evangelists, the marvelous growth of our Bible-schools, and

the general prosperity of our churches, why does it appear that we are actually losing in our total membership?

1. Because of the defection of the anti-society brethren, in the South especially. From year to year fewer of their church members have been included by the State Secretaries in their reports, but a larger amount of this loss has been charged off this year than ever before.

Chapter IV, "A Portrait of a Disaster (Owen County, Indiana: a Case Study in Differentiation)" is a unique approach to the study of Disciple divisions, on the basis of an investigation of the entire representative area's churches. In Owen County, Indiana, are to be found churches of all three of the major groups into which the Restoration movement has subdivided (1, Disciples of Christ; 2, Churches of Christ; 3, New Light Christians--merged with the Congregationalists in 1930). To eliminate from this thesis a great bulk of material about these churches which did not bear upon the matter of their schisms, but which needed to be on record as documentary evidence in support of items here employed, a separate book of some 200 pages was published.¹ The same causes of division as are enumerated in Chapter III were found to be operative here.

Chapter V, "The Camps of a Divided Army (Unity: a Bond of Hope Among the Fragments)" exhibits the progressive subdivision of the Churches of Christ as this conservative body has endeavored to follow the orthodox program of the Restoration movement for reproducing a specific pattern of a church, the "blue prints" of which are conceived to be in the New Testament. The practice of exclusion and division having once been embraced, its natural work and

¹ A. T. DeGroot, The Churches of Christ in Owen County, Indiana (Spencer, Ind.: by the author, 1935).

its logical extension have proceeded apace among the Churches of Christ. This body signalized its distinct existence apart from the Disciples of Christ by publishing a List of Preachers of Churches of Christ in 1906, including the names of 657 "loyal" ministers. The annual issuance of this volume found increasing numbers of preachers who were identified with the Church of Christ cause. By 1925 the list had grown to about 2,400 names. However, in that year the Apostolic Way, a journal issued from Dallas, Texas, brought out A Year Book Containing List of Preachers of Churches of Christ. It contained only about 150 names. The Apostolic Way was an anti-Sunday School paper, and included in its Year Book only those men whom it calculated agreed with its position. Further evidence of this sense of separation from the main stream of the Churches of Christ was given in the first Church Directory of the Churches of Christ of the United States and Canada, compiled by E. N. Glenn in 1926. Its introduction said: "Many churches that oppose 'Bible schools' did not list with us; neither did those list who oppose 'Sunday school.' Approximately one-third of the number of 'Churches of Christ' are not listed in this directory." If the free movement among all the Churches of Christ and the inclusion of their names in a Year Book professing to represent the "loyal" ministers and the "true" phase of the movement are the criteria of unity, a split in the Churches of Christ had then occurred over the Sunday school question.

In the same fashion details are given in this chapter of other divisions over (2) the college question, sponsored especially by Daniel Sommer and his Apostolic Review; (3) premillennialism, or "Bollism" (from R. H. Boll, editor of Tord and Tork); (4) the

one cup question, which enjoys the support of such papers as The Truth, Mental Diet, and the Old Paths Advocate. A letter from Mr. Waller to this writer, dated June 20, 1939, indicated that the pursuance of the questions involved has led to multiple fragmentation of the Churches of Christ in the town where his paper (Mental Diet, McKinney, Texas) is published. He said: "There are four assemblies or Churches of Christ in this small village, with four different beliefs."

Another division among the Churches of Christ is now developing to a significant extent, and is likely to grow in importance because its special doctrinal point of distinction lies in precisely the area most sacred and carefully guarded from all "humanisms," that is, the worship service. Two of the three journals last named, the Truth and Mental Diet, insist that the items in a truly Christian order of worship should always be exactly the same as the sequence set forth in Acts 2:42. The circulation of these periodicals is counted in thousands, and reaches practically every State in the Union as well as fourteen foreign countries. The Truth takes responsibility for securing the support of a missionary family in India.

The foregoing account of five distinct camps within the Churches of Christ does not, of course, exhaust the tendencies toward schism in this body. As is the case in most religious groups, there are lesser causes of division operating within each of these sections, and other movements are at work which may evenuate in new schisms. For example, a most likely subject of division has arisen recently by the establishment of an agency or society called the "Morrow Bible and Testament Foundation." S. F.

Morrow organized this foundation in September, 1925, to distribute scriptures without profit. At the present writing the Morrow Foundation does not have a journal to advocate its position, with the result that it goes quietly about its work and gets little publicity. Condemned as a society, however, it continues to function. This is a significant fact in Church of Christ history.

Differentiation among the Disciples of Christ is of a somewhat different nature. When one moves out of the area of the proof-text type of mentality, with its either-or philosophy, the problem of unity becomes less brittle and less subject to sudden division over some strain upon the body occasioned by the rediscovery of an old text having a new importance. The Disciples of Christ find their tendencies toward differentiation expressed in terms of the liberal or conservative leanings of their people. Higher criticism, federation connections with other Christian bodies, open membership, a delegate convention, and the unification of missionary and other co-operative activities are the problems which have disturbed the Disciples. Certain publishing houses have identified themselves with distinct points of view on these questions. The moderate or middle-of-the-road policy has for some time been encouraged by the Christian-Evangelist. The right wing or conservative side is supported by the Christian Standard and the Restoration Herald. Liberalism and freedom of inquiry and experimentation were championed by the Christian Century, which was distinctly a journal of the Disciples until it reached so large an audience that it began to serve the interdenominational field. The Scroll, organ of the Campbell Institute, and not identified with a publishing house, has been a voice of liberal religion

among the Disciples of Christ from its origin in 1903. This line-up of papers is exhibited by short histories of the problems of (1) Open membership, and (2) Federation. A section entitled "Toward a Restoration Denomination" details the endeavor, now relaxing, to draw off a part of the Disciples of Christ into a separate body apart from the middle and liberal sections. This movement had its primary impetus in a short lived organ, the Touchstone, published by the Standard Publishing Company, Cincinnati, Ohio, and was taken up by the Restoration Herald, a journal created to advance the cause of independent missions (independent of the Disciple organizations). The recent break of the Standard Publishing Company away from the Restoration Herald seems to have removed, for the present, the likelihood of schism.

The "Epilogue" to this thesis finds a modern token of allegiance to the blue-print theory of New Testament Christianity, on the part of a thoroughly trained young leader of conservative Disciples, in the book Adventuring for Christian Unity, by D. E. Walker. The author, who has studied in conservative Disciple institutions and spent two years in the University of Glasgow, Scotland, treats of the church "as revealed in the New Testament in express terms or approved precedent." These express terms or approved precedents are a species of will-o'-the-wisp which has ever intrigued the mind of the Disciples of Christ. If such things exist it should be a simple matter to exhibit them in 1,2,3 order. A commonly used illustration of Christian unity, in terms of a burned meeting house being restored in accordance with its rediscovered blue prints, would be more honest historically if it brought its account up to date by adding that when several carpen-

ters went to work on the basis of several pages of blue prints, they ended by building a three room apartment instead of a single auditorium. This is precisely what happened as the New Testament has been consulted as a pattern for the church. If more than a century of demonstration may be termed historical proof, it should be clear that there is no blue print of a single church in the New Testament.

It has been the growing belief of less conservative Disciples, however, that a proper reading of the New Testament sees the matter of church unity in it as something sought and not something attained. The question was then and is now, How can we get it, and not, How can we preserve or restore it. With an increasing portion of the human race the non-conservative Disciples have come to view as illusory the idea that a Golden Age of perfect men and institutions existed in the past. They distrust "lets-go-back" defeatism. They seek unity as Jesus prayed for it, not as achieved but as a necessary, attainable ideal, indispensable to effective Christian life.

The foregoing recital is more than the history of a church; it is a part of the life story of an idea. It is, to the writer at least, evidence in abundance that the principle of restoring a fixed pattern of a primitive Christian church is divisive and not unitive.

